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ABSTRACT

Kenneth Burke was a college dropout who did not enjoy notable success until quite late in life. His major interest was the development of a meta-theory of language, which he called "rhetoric." Denied the resources and material rewards of academia, Burke was both scapegoated and redeemed by the academic community. Furthermore, the scapegoaters and redeemers primarily use the same four elements of Burke's writings to achieve their goals--both groups can best be analyzed by using the Burkeian concepts of "order" and "terministic screens." Burke's writings were denigrated by the proponents of the "New Criticism" because they were not ontological enough. The first major academic responses to Burke--by Sidney Hook, Max Black, and John Crowe Ransom--focused on his lack of formal education, his dialectic approach, and his combination of epistemological and ontological approaches. Burke's redemption came about with the waning power of New Criticism, replaced by the new order of "reader response criticism, "deconstructionism," and a primarily epistemological critical framework. Beginning in 1967, epistemological analysis is dominant in speech communication for the next 20 years. Burke's linkage with the new theorists is obvious. As a (non-dogmatic) Marxist, Burke was more than willing to draw on a variety of resources for his theoretical work. He has crossed disciplinary boundaries--he was always " post-modern." Contemporary critics, in fact, perceive Burke through their own particular terministic screens. Perhaps Burke spent his life consciously playing "devil's advocate" with whatever academic order was dominant. (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

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Burke and Academia: Revenge of the Specialists

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Kenneth Burke:

Revenge of the Specialists

Born in 1897 or 1895, depending on your source, Burke devoted his life to critical thought, especially the nature of language. However, Burke did not enjoy any notable success despite the publication of more than ten books and hundreds of articles and reviews until quite late in his life. He was an outcast for most of his life; even the American Marxists of the nineteen thirties and forties repudiated Burke. A college dropout who never held a "tenured academic position", Burke spent most of his life on a small backward farm in New Jersey (Simons, 4). Despite this denial of the resources and material rewards of academia, Burke continued to write: continually refining and developing his critical theories. He also wrote a multitude of book and music reviews for "small" magazines, especially The Dial. One suspects this kind of writing, while of interest to Burke, was done primarily for the financial remuneration. Burke's major interest was the development of a meta-theory of language, what he called "rhetoric". His theory prefigured much of the Humanities' current theoretical discussion. The questions become: how was Burke relegated to insignificant status for so long? and how was he redeemed? Notice that I am not suggesting that Burke achieved his present academic status through his own

actions. Instead, I will argue that both the scapegoating and redemption of Burke was achieved by the academic community. Furthermore, the scapegoaters and redeemers (and some academics occupy both positions) primarily use the same four elements of Burke's writings to achieve their goals and both projects can best be analyzed using the Burkeian concepts of "Order" and "terministic screens". In other words, Burke did not change drastically in sixty years of critical writing; what did change was the academic "Order" as defined by the majority of academics' individual "terministic screens".

The four elements of Burke's texts that both camps fasten upon for their respective projects are: the combination of ontological and epistemic perspectives, Burke's lack of a college degree, his interdisciplinary approach, and the circular flexibility of Burke's various positions (dialectics). Obviously, the scope of this paper does not allow for an examination of all of Burke's critical texts. However, Chesebro argues that Burke's work can be divided into two segments, the epistemic period and the ontological one, with the period after 1985 consisting of Burke's attempts to integrate the two perspectives (1988 get exact original quote). Chesebro has a point, but I think he makes the mistake (along with Burke, himself) of assuming that Burke has changed, whereas I will argue that ontological and epistemic perspectives were interwoven throughout the Burkeian critical corpus. Stanley Hyman recognized the inclusion of both the epistemic and ontological

perspectives in Burkeian texts as early as 1942. However, Hyman is careful to point out that:

> To use his [Burke's] own stress-shifting technique, his earlier work emphasized it as symbolic action, his later work as symbolic action.
>
> Landmark Essays on Kenneth Burke, 19

I agree that Burke's emphasis on either the epistemic or the ontological aspects of his general theory has shifted many times, (often within the same text) but he always includes both aspects.

The real change over the period from 1931 to the present has been the critical "Order". As William Cain notes in his overview of literary critical theory, the "New Criticism" dominated the academic scene from approximately 1930 to 1970. He argues that "[T]hough the New Criticism has been declared "dead" many times, it continues to inform our understanding" (Crisis in Criticism, xvii). I would suggest to Chesebro and others that the "New Criticism" was/is primarily an ontological approach to criticism and a self-interested strategy for founding an academic Order. Burke's writings were denigrated by the founders of the New Critical Order because they were not ontological enough. It seems to me Burke could not have been unaware of the critical tide that was flowing, but he was stubborn or combative enough to continue his exploration of both epistemic and ontological aspects of language in contradiction of the principles of what Cain calls "the Establishment itself" (101).

The first major academic responses to Kenneth Burke were

primarily negative. People like Sidney Hook (1937), Max Black (1946), Bernard Duffy (1948), and Marius Bewley (1952) all applied their own highly defined ideologies or terministic screens to Burke's theories. Perhaps Hook and Black best exemplify the sacrificial nature of Burke for the establishment of the New Order, synonymous with New Criticism. Hook states that Burke:

> writes as a critic of life and manners. To his credit, be it said he has developed independently of technical philosophical thought a kind of homebaked objective relativism
>
> Critical Responses, 91.

Perhaps I am just reading from my own biased perspective, but this kind of passage suggests that Burke is an uneducated, country hick who happens to have stumbled upon a down home kind of philosophical theory, which is obviously inferior to the "technical philosophical thought" one assumes is typical of a professional academic like Hook. Hook also comments on Burke's use of language stating that the "greatest difficulty that confronts the reader of Burke is finding out what he means" (C.R., 89) and Burke's constant "jockeying back and forth between positions" (C.R., 93). As John Crowe Ransom states in 1946, Burke's notion of adopting a "comic" perspective does not "furnish his frail logico-mathematical structure with some decent imagery in order to make it 'ontologically' presentable" (C.R., 157). Ransom keeps his criticism of Burke on an academic level,

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unlike Hook, Black, and Bewley, but it is nonetheless devastating.

So far we have looked at criticism of Burke that focuses on his lack of a formal education, his dialectic approach, and his combination of epistemological and ontological approaches. However, the most valuable attribute of Burke's early texts, for "scapegoating" purposes is their eclectic sources. Burke was a Marxist (although not a dogmatic one) and he was more than willing to draw on a variety of sources for his theoretical work. Black's review of A Rhetoric of Motives can serve as a summary of the academic community's disapproval of Burke's eclectic source material:

> The vast rambling edifice of quasi-sociological, quasi-psycho-analytical speculation seems to rest on nothing more solid than a set of unexamined and uncriticized assumptions [emphasis mine] C.R., 168-169.

The words Black uses and the tone of this final sentence indicate that Burke should not be basing any theory on sociological principles (read Marxist principles) or psychological principles (read Freudian principles) because he is not an expert. We must remember that although New Criticism was established as the dominant critical ideology in 1946, there were still interdisciplinary battles over prestige, status, and funding. What we have here is a philosopher asserting the primacy of his discipline and denying Burke's competence to utilize even lesser disciplines. Bewley brings this kind of attack even closer to

home asserting that Burke sees all problems resolved in his mythical Marxist philosophy: "[P]oetry and life collide at the enchanted turn-stile of Marxism" (The Complex Fate, 243). Even today, in American society to accuse someone of being a Marxist is an insult, in 1952 it was outright defamation of character. Furthermore, Burke is not only a Marxist, but an irrational one; given the political climate of America in 1952 calling anyone an irrational Marxist was probably redundant.

Although I have only mentioned four critics who substantively denigrate the validity of Burke's work, they are major critics from a variety of disciplines. Their criticism of Burke may vary in tone, but not in the avenues of attack; they all focused on the four elements that made Burke a perfect "scapegoat" for the establishment and solidification of the New Critical "Order". They need a "victim" because, as Burke notes, "members were made consubstantial by the sacrifice of this victim" (GMRM, 790). Of course Burke is only talking about a group of boys who form a club based on killing a snake, but Burke asserts that this situation can serve as "a human society in miniature" (GMRM, 790). Burke's constant emphasis on encompassing the distance between epistemic and ontological concerns, (Hook's "objective relativism") his lack of a degree, his interdisciplinary approach, and his theory of dialectics made him the perfect, if not the only, target of "scapegoating" tactics. Scapegoating occurs when the social hierarchy changes or as Burke puts it "[A] genuine 'new order' is a new social

ladder" (GMRM, 788). To integrate these Burkeian concepts: a scapegoat is a consubstantial victim who serves the persecutors in the establishment of a new social hierarchy (GMRM).

However, I am not suggesting that this attack on Burke was a monolithic or eternal one. Once the New Criticism was firmly established, no longer needing a scapegoat to achieve consubstantiality, Burke acquired his share of fans. His fans included such influential critics as: William Rueckert, Marie Hochmuth Nichols, Stanley Edgar Hyman, and Kermit Lansner. Hyman places Burke in the illustrious company of such people as Eliot, Empson, Bodkin, and Richards. Hyman valorizes Burke as an interdisciplinary critic while attempting to place him in a valued intellectual tradition (neo-Aristotelian) and labels Burke's system symbolic action. This attempt by Hyman, which parallels the attempts by other authors to validate "Burkology", seems to justify my analysis of the attacks on Burke. Hyman, Rueckert, and Nichols all know the basic objections by the "Establishment" to Burke and thus, they base their defense of him on the four criteria I have identified. Hyman values Burke so highly (and it is hard to imagine being placed any higher in the world of literary criticism than with Eliot, Bodkin, and Richards) because "Burke has done almost everything in the repertoire of modern criticism" (Armed Vision, 401). But Burke's fans, although they are reputable academics and know the objections to Burke, cannot ever make him more than a marginal figure. As William Rueckert would say, even a "partial

purification" of Burke was an arduous task before 1970. A complete redemption and valorization of Burke would have contradicted the foundational principles of New Criticism. While the New Critical "Order" was secure enough to tolerate some redemption and use of "Burkology", it could not validate Burke as a central figure without destroying it's own truth claims.

Therefore Burke's complete (?) redemption comes about as result of the waning power of New Criticism. No longer the "god-term" of critical thought New Criticism is replaced with the new "Order" of "reader-response criticism", "deconstructionism", and a primarily epistemological critical framework. As Chesebro notes, beginning with R. Scott in 1967, epistemological analysis is dominant in speech communication for the next twenty years (Landmark Essays, 135). All one has to do to verify this statement is look at the reasons for Burke's re-evaluation. As Cain notes in his overview of twentieth century critical trends it was "during the 1970s and 80s, we have heard a good deal of vague talk about Burke having 'anticipated' French structuralism and post-structuralism" (141). Burke's lack of a formal education, at this point in time, seems like more of a blessing than a liability. He is not trapped by the dogma of the previously dominant order or closely identified with it either. The linkage between Burke and the new theorists (Fish, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Iser) is obvious. He had crossed the disciplinary boundaries; he had created "perspectives by

incongruity"; he was already a neo-Marxist. Burke was always "post-modern".

But Burke rejects his redemption by, in Chesebro's terms, developing "a dramatistic theory of symbol-using [which] is decidedly ontological in nature" (Landmark Essays, 143). My contention is that the ontological aspect of Burke was always present; but now that the epistemic mode of analysis is prevalent in the academic community Burke is seen as arguing for a more "reality" based critical methodology. The critics of this period, 1970-1985 approximately, analyze Burke according to their "terministic screens" just as the New Critics analyzed Burke in the past according to their "terministic screens". Ironically, the critics of the 70s and 80s focus on the aspects of Burke's texts that the New Critics did, but since the "god-terms" have been inverted they valorize Burke, conveniently overlooking, or under-estimating the ontological aspects of his texts. One critic who does not allow either his terministic screen or his admiration of Burke to blind him to the ontological and epistemological nature of all Burke's texts is Frank Lentricchia. Lentricchia is clearly a product of the 70s and 80s, and as such, values the epistemic perspective. However, he does not overlook the ontological aspects of Burke stating that:

> These two strategies of interpretation are at work in Burke's texts from the <u>beginning</u>; although in his two interpretations of interpretation he clearly elevates one over the other, neither such valorization nor the

> mere fact of high-level hermeneutic self-consciousness permits him to master the essentializing impulse in his writing [emphasis mine]
>
> Landmark Essays, 225.

I emphasized the two words "beginning" and "master" in the quotation above because I think they demonstrated two important points. The word "beginning" demonstrates that at least Lentricchia agrees with me that the epistemic and ontological perspectives have been present in all of Burke's critical texts. The word "master" reveals nothing about Burke, but it does reveal Lentricchia's terministic screen. Lentricchia feels that it is important to eliminate the "essentializing" or universalizing tendency in a critical text. Just like the New Critics denigrated Burke because their terministic screens valorized the ontological perspective, Lentricchia criticizes Burke because his terministic screen valorizes the epistemological perspective.

Wayne Booth is another important literary critic who perceives Burke through his own terministic screen. However, Booth is interesting because he has possessed both terministic screens described so far. In Booth's essay "Kenneth Burke's Comedy: The Multiplication of Perspectives" the conflict between an analysis of Burke using the New Critical terministic screen and an analysis of Burke using a post-modern terministic screen becomes apparent. Booth relates what I consider a "representative anecdote" about his impression of Burke:

> In the late forties I took part in a discussion of... well, I thought the subject was Huckleberry Finn, which for me at the time meant that we should talk only of the structure of that made object
>
> Landmark Essays, 269.

Irritated at the time by Burke's seemingly irrelevant comments about things outside the text Booth ceased to listen. However, in 1979 Booth can write an essay praising Burke for his "pluralism" and "eclecticism". The closest identification of Kenneth Burke with people like Barthes and Foucault is Cary Nelson's "Writing as the Accomplice of Language". He notes that Burke's "vocabulary -- if one reads Burke from the vantage point of other recent theory -- is at once obsessional and irreverent. Moreover, it is exemplary precisely because of this unstable paradoxicality" (Legacy, 165). If you remember Hook's comment in 1937 about Burke's language "the greatest difficulty that confronts the reader of Burke is finding out what he means" it becomes obvious that Hook's and Nelson's analyses of Burke are exactly the same -- only the valence of the terms has been inverted. The former scapegoat of the 40s, 50s, and 60s has been redeemed by the new post-modern order of the 70s and 80s. An interesting note here is that Nelson sees Burke's "progression" in terms exactly opposite to Chesebro perception. Nelson argues "I believe that Burke's work of the past twenty-five years [1968-1993] presents a somewhat different view of rhetorical actions, human agency and language in general than that he

propounded through the 1950s" (Legacy, 157). Nelson is arguing that Burke is finally "perfecting" his epistemic vision. However, despite Burke's famous concern about humans "being rotten with perfection" another Order seems to be approaching. This new, or current, Order seems to want to integrate epistemic and ontological perspectives into some kind of functional meta-perspective.

Finally, after a mere sixty years, we may get to the heart of Burke's lifelong project. Instead of complaining that he was not ontological enough and epistemological or that he was a brilliant epistemologist, but clung to those outdated ontological ideas, we might finally realize that Burke was always trying to integrate the two perspectives. Chesebro's article is an invaluable first step in that direction. While I may disagree with him about when we see Burke taking on this creation of a functional meta-perspective, we certainly agree about the importance and difficulty of the task. Chesebro's conclusion about the final phase of Burke's critical task is appropriate:

> Thus, while functioning as different perspectives, the ontological and epistemic conceptions are not inconsistent for Burke. Ontological and epistemic perspectives mutually define symbol-using. The ontological addresses the question of what the nature of the human being as symbol-user is. The epistemic addresses the question of how human beings use and are used by symbols. For Burke, both questions must be

> addressed if a comprehensive view of symbol-using is to be provided
>
> Landmark Essays, 147.

The major problem I have with Chesebro's analysis in the above quotation is that in light of our previous appropriations of Kenneth Burke's work I am very suspicious of this new appropriation. According to Chesebro's own schemata of Burke's "development" through the decades it strikes me as interesting that Burke always opposed the current academic "Order" as created by individuals' terministic screens. In the 30s, 40s, and 50s when an emphasis on ontological analysis was the dominant perspective Burke (according to Chesebro) emphasized the epistemic. In the late 60s, 70s, and 80s when the epistemic perspective was dominant Chesebro identifies Burke as being obsessed with the ontological perspective. And in the 90s Chesebro identifies Burke as trying to unite these two perspectives. I would argue that like Wayne Booth, Chesebro has merely shifted his terministic screen as have many of the current crop of intellectuals who have become dissatisfied with the futility of the extreme epistemic perspective. And like always there is Kenneth Burke just waiting to be used -- appropriate for any project, compatible with any perspective, possessing any number of methodologies to choose from and with a seemingly inexhaustible terminology. To borrow a phrase from Howard Nemerov, Burke is "Everything, Preferably All At Once" and our meta-meta-critical analysis of his work and/or appropriation of

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his material is more likely to be a revelation of our terministic screens and whatever the current academic "Order" might be, than any valid analysis of Burke. In other words, Burke functions for me and Chesebro in precisely the same way he did for the new critics and the post-modern critics: we take Burkology and process it with our idiosyncratic terministic screens to create a new Order or destroy an old one. However, the one benefit I do see is that Burke did address the major critical concerns of the twentieth century and that no matter how we use or misuse him, the man will not suffer from being either fashionable or unfashionable.

Finally, I would like to offer an alternative explanation to the various perceptions of Burkology, including my own privileged perceptions. It seems at least plausible to suggest that Burke spent his life consciously playing "Devil's advocate" with whatever academic Order was dominant. This analysis of Burke seems appropriate if we accept Chesebro's schemata of Burke's shifting emphasis. However, I would like to offer two alternative textual proofs. The first proof is Burke's constant use of "we". As Wayne Booth notes:

> Burke always refers to himself as 'we' a stylistic choice that for many years offended me, until I finally figured out his reasons for it
>
> Landmark Essays, 250.

The "reason" for Burke's use of "we" from an epistemic perspective is to indicate the multiplicity of perspectives; an

article of faith for epistemic critics is that no one perspective is correct. But Burke started using "we" way back in the 30s. This fact suggests to me that he did it to annoy other academics. The only interpretation a critic in the 30s and 40s could read into a single author's use of "we" was the Royal "We". And later on as the New Criticism took hold, Burke continued to use "we" in the face of the preferred pseudo-objective New Critical "one". The post-modern critics who privilege the epistemic perspective use the word "I" so Burke's "we" is still contradictory and contentious, although most post-modern critics tend to overlook this "minor" deviation.

The second textual proof for Burke consciously adopting a "Devil's Advocate" stance is that he seems to have understood the material consequences of specialization and submission to the dominant Order very early in his career. In A Rhetoric of Motives (1950) Burke notes that:

> we are clearly in the region of rhetoric when considering the identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social class or economic class. And ironically, with much college education today in literature and fine arts, the very stress upon the pure autonomy of such activities is a roundabout way of identification with a privileged class, as the doctrine may enroll the student stylistically under the banner of a privileged class,

serving as a kind of social insignia promising preferment GMRM, 551-552.

Burke's analysis of the material rewards of specialization and submission strikes me as an almost Foucaultian awareness of power, its perks and pitfalls. By refusing to come to the centre of power when he understood it so clearly, Burke may have staked out his territory -- always on the margin. On the margin, because one cannot really challenge the power of any established "Order" from the centre. Maybe my argument with Chesebro is completely meaningless. Maybe Burke did change his emphasis just as Chesebro suggests. However, if Burke did change his emphasis it was always a change which supported whichever perspective was being currently discounted. In a purely sophistic (or Burkeian) manner then, I am right. Burke's texts always contained the epistemic and ontological perspectives, or they always supported/emphasized whichever one was in disfavor with the academic Order. Either way Burke was always concerned with both the epistemic and ontological perspectives.

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